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SUBJECT: SUDAN: HASSAN AL-TURABI MEETS COMMISSION FOR
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom met with People's Congress Party (PCP) Secretary General Hassan al-Turabi at his home on January

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[1](#)18. Turabi said worship should be free of state control, but freedom of religion is shaped by society, not just the state. Responding to the Commissioner's questions on terrorism, Turabi criticized the United States and the West for their lack of understanding of Islam and for supporting Arab dictators and Israel, which make Osama bin Laden's message appealing to Muslims. He cited the National Congress Party's centralized and militaristic rule as the root of Sudan's problems and he does not expect the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) to change that. He said that a solution in Darfur depends on the NCP giving up some of its 52% of National Assembly seats, and urged the United States and SPLM not to protect those seats just because they are allotted by the CPA. End Summary.

Religion Means all Life

[1](#)2. A delegation of two Commissioners and two professional staff from the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom met with PCP Secretary General Hassan al-Turabi at his home on the evening of January 18. Turabi used to meet Americans here, but "fundamentalism" ended all that, he laughed. After introductions, the Commissioners explained that Sudan is a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) with respect to religious freedom, and thus has their attention.

[1](#)3. (U) Turabi's discussion of religion focused on the theme that "religion means all life." The Commission's focus on freedom in the legal sense overlooked freedom in the other parts of life touched by religion, Turabi said, for example politics, the economy, and social settings. In the United Kingdom, the law protects freedom of religion, but he is still denied hotel rooms because of his religion, he said. Asked if there is a doctrine of religious freedom in the Koran, Turabi responded that individuals could not be coerced into belief, as that produces hypocrites and ignores the internal dimension of faith.

[1](#)4. (U) The Commission expressed skepticism of Turabi's record regarding his claim that Christians should be allowed to build churches without interference. Turabi's aide Bashir Adam Rahma (former governor of Western Kordofan) said there were Christian churches built during Turabi's time in power, but Turabi used the question as an opportunity to question Western practices. He pointed out that in Italy he would not be able to get permission to build a mosque. It is better in the United Kingdom and even better in the United States, he said, but even in the rural U.S. it is hard to build a mosque and not get harassed. Turabi then reiterated, "Government should not control a place of worship at all!"

Democratize Religion, Democratize Sudan

[1](#)5. (U) Turabi said that in Islam there is no church, as access to God is direct. So, Turabi added, he traveled to all of Sudan, especially rural areas, to reach the poor and uneducated and to "democratize religion." Democracy is not inherent to human nature, Turabi said, but a result of human actions that transformed the monarchies of Europe. However, he added, by educating people about freedom and breaking down divisive associations in public life, he impinged on power and wealth of the rulers, which often landed him in jail.

[1](#)6. (U) In response to the Commissioner's questions, Turabi expressed skepticism about the future of the CPA, saying the military leaders use words to draw people in, but then break from them. This deception undermined the Addis Agreement (1972), and the agreement with Riek Machar in the 1990s, he said. "The agreement is not even that good," he remarked,

asking why anyone would sign an agreement that gives the other side a majority of seats in government. People are happy with the peace, and perhaps the country will democratize, he speculated, but the elections will be a farce; every official in the country is appointed and the government is financing its party with oil revenue. To resolve Sudan's real problems, the government needs to decentralize, he concluded.

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17. (U) Turabi said there are two issues that will shape the referendum: southerners in the north who vote for unity and development in the South. Before advocating unity in the referendum, Turabi said, Sudanese have to unify themselves by rebuilding. If there is improvement, people may choose unity.

Terrorism and American Foreign Policy

18. (U) Commissioner Cromartie asked Turabi about jihad. Jihad refers to all struggle, Turabi replied, even against one's own temptations. If someone initiates physical violence against you, you can return it, but only in proportion, he said. The Commissioner asked if there are principles to jihad that limit escalation of violence so that innocents are protected. Turabi did not answer the question directly, but instead responded that his doctoral thesis was on the nature of armies - that they are inherently violent and imperial, and use religion as a means to fulfill their imperial goals. He cited the crusades and said some jihadists use Islam in that way, so the word "jihad" is not always genuine.

19. (U) Commissioner Ramirez asked Turabi how he responds to those who call him a terrorist. He replied that the West does not understand Islam. Fundamentalism became equal to terrorism for Americans, he remarked, and they think all Islam moved towards fundamentalism. Turabi clarified that he directs his criticism of America at the U.S. administration, not American citizens. "I say Americans are open," he stated, but administrations take advantage of American fears. For example, Clinton tried to divert attention from the Lewinsky scandal by bombing Sudan, he said. Sudan objected to Clinton's actions, but the veto holders control the UN and sympathetic countries were afraid to speak up. Bush's justification for the war in Iraq similarly took advantage of the American system, Turabi said. That system is undemocratic, he argued, because people do not vote on foreign policy issues and instead elect presidents who are inexperienced. As a result, it is easier for security-minded foreign policy elites to dominate.

110. (SBU) Commissioner Cromartie inquired about the relationship between Turabi and Osama Bin Laden. Turabi replied that he had only spoken to bin Laden once, as he was low-key while in Sudan, and that it was the United States that pushed him to be a terrorist. Commissioner Cromartie asked if bin Laden was guilty of 9/11. Turabi said no, it was beyond bin Laden's capacity as an organization. "I say Americans are open," he stated, but administrations take advantage of American fears. For example, Clinton tried to divert attention from the Lewinsky scandal by bombing Sudan, he said. Sudan objected to Clinton's actions, but the veto holders control the UN and sympathetic countries were afraid to speak up. Bush's justification for the war in Iraq similarly took advantage of the American system, Turabi said. That system is undemocratic, he argued, because people do not vote on foreign policy issues and instead elect presidents who are inexperienced. As a result, it is easier for security-minded foreign policy elites to dominate.

111. (U) The Commission staff pointed out that in America we are open about our shortcomings, and this freedom is a good thing. With respect to the Commission, he added, it has spoken out on religious freedom for Muslims in China, in Uzbekistan, and other places. Turabi and his aides responded by raising the issues of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Commissioner Cromartie said those responsible for Abu Ghraib are now in jail.

Tell Riek and Salva Their Winnings Are Safe

112. (U) Turabi's aide, the former governor of Western Kordofan, emphasized that pressure is needed for a settlement on the principles of power and wealth sharing in Darfur. He said this government is blackmailing the international community by saying that if the NCP gives up any of its 52% in the National Assembly, it would violate the CPA. The aide urged the U.S. not to be blackmailed, saying there will be no peace without more inclusion. This is also the basis for solution in the East, he said, to which Turabi added, "The East is coming." The aide

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concluded that the U.S. should press: "Tell Riek and Salva that their CPA winnings are safe, but the NCP can't be."

Comment

13. (SBU) Turabi's main target throughout the conversation was the NCP, and he was happy to use American, and especilly the Commission's, principles of religious freedom and democracy to criticize the government. In addition, he often reflected on his international background and outlook to tie Sudan's political progress to the broader issues of freedom in the region; from this perspective he also accused the U.S. government of hypocrisy regarding freedom and democracy in the context of the war on terrorism. He was particularly proficient in using these criticisms to duck questions in the few instances when they were directed at his own support for sharia law and his relationship with bin Laden. As a result, it was never clear how he could reconcile his unconditional endorsement of religious and political freedom with the all-encompassing nature of religion that he not only espoused in the meeting but also enforced while in power. Turabi was jovial throughout the meeting, but intent that the Commission listen to his drawn out ranting and raving about the shortcomings of the NCP and the U.S. government.